

Ash Wednesday/Friday  
“Death and Resurrection,” Part 1  
February 24, 2023

In 1919 Congregationalists took what was considered at the time to be the “rather bold step” of recognizing Ash Wednesday. Lent is not deep in our bones as a congregation or as a denomination—which might be a good thing. It means that we are always seeking new meanings for these days in which we prepare to receive the good news of Easter. We even find new days to begin this season!

During Lent this year, we are turning to the “Wisdom Writings” of the Old Testament—the Psalms, Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes—to guide us along our way. Each day we will send out a reflection from one of our members that will consider those books, along with various writings from the New Testament.

Together we will be studying the Book of Ecclesiastes. I will be preaching from Ecclesiastes on Sunday mornings—and tonight as well.

Now, Ecclesiastes is a short but difficult book.

It begins with those words we heard tonight: “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity,” and repeats that word well over thirty times. Vanity—emptiness, vapor, the fleeting quality of beauty, of strength, of knowledge, of *life*.

Vanity.

This book, this word, this *wisdom* is “Part 1” of “Death and Resurrection.”

The author of this book, it is said, is “a true believer in death.”

Tonight, we hear the wisdom that comes to us as we look at our own mortality.

Tonight, we hear: “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.”

The affirmation that we are dust and that to dust we shall return gives an urgency to what we do while here on this earth—not a desperateness, but an urgency.

The message beneath those words, however, is “Live while you can.”

You see, wisdom gives us the ability to live as well as we can in a confusing world that we will never completely understand.

It is wise, then, to remember our mortality so that we might be fully alive in these days that we have. We number our days so that we might achieve a heart of wisdom

Each day we choose—to tear down or build up, to complain or to encourage, to welcome or to turn away. The choices we make, the actions we take will determine the fruit that our lives bear.

We start these days of Lent at the end—with a new awareness of the vanity of life, with that part of the message of the cross that speaks of death. And the ashes of this day, those reminders of our mortality, are often used to trace a cross upon our mortal bodies.

But unlike the author of Ecclesiastes, we are not “true believers” in death. There is something else—something *greater* than death—that claims us. Another of the Wisdom books, The Song of Solomon, tells us that “Love is stronger than death”

and points us toward that greater claim on our lives. If the cross speaks to us of death, it also whispers of resurrection and becomes the sign of Christ's victory over death.

Remember—not just that you are dust, not just that you shall return to dust.

Tonight, and in the days and weeks ahead, let us also remember the life beyond the dust, the wheat that dies and bears fruit, the cross that leads to resurrection. And in remembering, we might also learn the deeper wisdom that we often miss.

The strength of love is the wisdom that makes both our living and our dying significant.

The burden of love that Jesus offers, the yoke of compassion and community, do not give a life of ease. But they do give us a life of purpose and meaning. The lightness of the ashes that we take up tonight remind us of the light burden, the easy yoke that is gently held out toward us.

The ashes we receive put us in solidarity with those living in dust and ashes. At any time, and especially tonight, our worship is not complete unless it forges a deeper bond between us and those who are hungry and hurting, those who live with violence and warfare, those who are poor or despised. Out of that renewed connection we are sent from here to bring God's reversal of fortune, God's justice and healing to people who sit in ashes and weep. We are sent to repair the ruined cities and the places of devastation.

At the same time, tonight, and through the whole season of Lent, our eyes are fixed, not only on injustice, suffering, and death. We look further ahead and move toward the new possibilities that God is creating in us through the resurrected Christ.

We are dust. We are ashes.

Yes, the ashes of this day cause some consternation in our Protestant souls. We should and do take seriously Calvin's warnings against "the superstitious observance of Lent." The purpose of these ashes is to help us remember our common humanity. They help us remember that we are mortal, that life is short, that life is precious, and remembering, to focus on what matters: the love that is our origin and our destination.

So we have ashes—for those who desire them, for those who need them—but being true to our tradition and our congregational covenant, we don't force them on anyone. It is as good to go through this day without ashes as with them. We have ashes to cut through our deception, to serve as a stark reminder. And most of all this year we have ashes as a sign that when we number our days, we gain a heart of wisdom.

Let us, then, open ourselves once more to the wisdom of life. Our death is answered with resurrection. From the ending of ashes and crucifixion, we are offered a new beginning in the God who gives new life.